

Parashat Mishpatim: Shun Evil and Do Good

Dear Friends,

In the coming parashot several big theological revolutions will take place in Am Yisrael's narrative.

From this parasha onward, mitzvot will be the identifying trait of Am Yisrael, and will lie at the heart of the Israelite existence. The famous sentence "Na'aseh V'nishmah" (we will do and we will hear) starts in this week's parasha, and also sums it up: **Then he [Moshe] took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will faithfully do!"** (Sh'mot 24:7). Today most Jews are not observant, yet Judaism without mitzvot is a very new phenomenon.

This is why I would like to dedicate this week's drasha to practice, to "doing."

Over the years I have spoken a lot about a human being as just that - a being. We are not called "human doings." Humans were created in the image of the Creator, and His name in Hebrew is "Havaya" (being), or Y.H.V.H.. In English He is sometimes referred to as the Supreme Being.

For the past forty years - ever since the revolution in Iran - the west has been engaged in a conflict with Islam, referred to as The Clash of Civilizations. But there is a far deeper clash; the one between the Jewish path and that of the rest of the world, especially Buddhism. Whereas a Buddhist sits on a pillow, refraining from all activity and noise, and concentrates on quiet meditation, a Jew is constantly doing. Doing, doing and then doing some more. Even on Shabbat, when we are commanded to refrain from all work, we do not stop doing - there are kiddush, prayer services, meals, blessings, and then some more meals, and more blessings. If we are lucky, our boisterous children allow us a siesta for an hour or two.

It appears that Parashat Mishpatim is the first parsha which turns humans - at least Jewish ones - into frenetic human doings.

I wish to debunk some basic spiritual premises and defend the constant doing and perhaps even hyperactivity of Am Yisrael.

I certainly do not wish to condemn meditators. I am one myself. More than that, besides my training as a rabbi, I have learned various methods and therapeutic approaches, including spiritual coaching with a Buddhist slant, which is called "Being Coaching". As opposed to

classic goal oriented coaching, the central question in this method of coaching is not “What do I choose to **do**?” but “Who do I choose to **be**?” Doing is a result of being.

I still believe in this path, but I am also a man of halacha, and halacha (whose literal meaning is “the walk”) asks an entirely different question: “How do I choose to **walk** my life?” Or in other words, “What do I **do and what don’t I do**?”

Are we then surprised that our nation is so restless and fidgety?

But it isn’t just Am Yisrael that is restless. All of Creation is vibrating. Nothing in the universe stands still. Everything is in constant motion - people, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Even when we sleep there are countless processes taking place in our bodies at every moment. “**The guardian of Israel does not rest or sleep.**” (Tehillim 121:4)

Looking out onto a pastoral, calm view is actually deceiving. This is because we are not attuned enough to see, feel, and hear life’s vibration: thousands of insects working ceaselessly; birds building nests and repairing them as the wind blows, flying to and fro with food for their offspring; entire biological processes occur in the cells of plants and trees, although to us they appear to be still; the constant movement of the air around us; and if there is a sea in our view, then the waves which ebb and flow and the invisible underwater currents that are constant and powerful.

Everything is energy, and energy is the life force itself, animated, vibrating, and in constant motion. There is continuous activity!

The hospital monitor with its green moving dot, rising and falling, signifying that the body is active and we are alive. The minute the line goes flat, we know that the heart has stopped, and so has life.

I am not suggesting that Parashat Mishpatim and all of the 613 positive and negative commandments which follow are meant to activate us. We already are in constant motion. Rather, these instructions are meant to help us channel our activity and the constant buzz within us: **Who is the person who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech. Refrain from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.** (Tehillim 24:13-15)

Animals and plants do not need operating instructions because they are animated by the laws of nature alone. Human beings are also animated by the laws of nature, but also by their thoughts, drives, fears, and the insecurity of the ego. We need limits because we humans have none of our own. We need laws of morality, because the ego is stronger than our desire to do good. People need prayer and blessing, because we do not truly recognize the hidden powers that are at work in the world.

Jewish halacha, which begins its journey in this parasha, Mishpatim, does not wish to suppress human beings - even though it sometimes appears to. On the contrary. Humans, animals, plants, and objects, are all the manifestation of God becoming in the world. But

human beings require assistance with this process. Halacha is designed to help us, humans, handle our complexity, confusion, drive, lust, fear, and magic, to be the harmonious partners in the process of creation, in the God's process of becoming.

If, the constant vibration and movement of life is God continuously becoming, let's replace the word "being" which has something passive, almost static about with the verb "becoming". This may actually be the meeting point between Jewish and Buddhist (and all other) civilizations.

The question that we can now offer in spiritual coaching isn't "who do you choose to be?" but rather, "what is it that wishes to come into being - to become - through you?"

Parashat Mishpatim contains all of the great principles that a person needs in order to be a harmonious partner in the process of becoming. It deals primarily with the requirement to respect - respect every person, respect life, respect the parents who brought us into this world, respect the possessions of others, respect the legal system which upholds society. In short, to respect all of creation in its process of continuous becoming.

But there is room for improvement in the Jewish system of becoming. There is room for a softening of instructions, for less exclamation marks. One person's prayer is unlike that of another, and his distress is not that of other similar people. In the do's and don't's it's important that each person recognize his or her own unique motion, vibration, heartbeats, laziness, and activity.

And then, we, human doings, can be in harmony with creation, which does not cease to become, even for a moment.

The great revolution of Parashat Mishpatim is to ask us to examine our actions closely, to offer us a life compass: are we channeling our motion for the good? Do we **refrain from evil and do good?**

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha